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AUTHOR Aronson, Lisa
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ABSTRACT

Under the direction of the National Audubon Society Expedition, a special nine-month school tours the United States and in the process its students learn all about their country and come to a better understanding of themselves as well. Each year approximately 20 students from diverse backgrounds and ranging in age from 15 to 23 years participate in the expedition which was formed by educators Mike and Diana Cohen. The group travels across the country in a school bus, camping along the way. It draws questions from the social and natural environment around it and finds answers through talks with experts such as farmers, scientists, historians, musicians, and rangers. Reading, observation, written work, and group critiques are also important. During one expedition year the young people spent two weeks working on a Mennonite farm, lived another two weeks on a Hopi reservation studying Hopi religious ceremonies, and explored tropical reefs on the island of St. John. The program not only teaches conservation and environmental appreciation, it also functions as a form of therapy in which students learn to be curious and probing, to listen to their feelings, and to question their values and those of the society around them. This paper summarizes the experiences of one of the participants in the program with particular emphasis directed toward the psychological benefits to be gained. (DS)

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Lisa Aronson

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ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION - A UNIQUE THERAPY

by Lisa Aronson

January 1979

It's not easy to live under snow, rain and sun for nine months with twenty students from different backgrounds. It's not comfortable to leave one's crutches, friends, structured schoolroom and well-learned roles. On the school directed by the National Audubon Society Expedition Institute students place themselves in these situations and yet describe the program as the most educational and socially beneficial experience of their lives. It's also fun.

On the first day of school the students share little in common besides their eagerness to make the next nine months "work". Varying in ages from 15-23 years, their goals range from getting to know the United States firsthand and learning without grades, to "finding oneself" in the natural world and living in a small group. Students are New Yorkers who've never seen a cow, Mainers who've never entered a skyscraper, Irish Catholics who've never befriended Jews and students who've seen the world. Sons of professors and plumbers, daughters of doctors and tour guides, some have been labelled artistically gifted, dumb jocks, problem children or exceptionally bright. The students, diverse as the situations in which they find themselves while on the expedition, emerge from the program with a deep appreciation for the natural world, other people and themselves.

In discussing the expedition's members Holly Sidford and Ellen Rothman, Educational Directors of Old Sturbridge Village Museum write, "They are distinguished...for their unembarrassed involvement in a collective learning process. Above all, they form and nurture a group which has a keen sense of responsibility for itself - to be

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patient, supportive, mature, to provide for itself and for its own intellectual and emotional growth."¹

The processes which transform these dissimilar students into a cohesive group of academic and social achievers should be noted by parents, educators, students and psychologists everywhere.

Many facets of the expedition make it unique. In addition to teaching conservation and environmental appreciation, the expedition functions as a form of therapy. On the program students learn to be curious, probing, to listen to their feelings, to question their values and those of the society around them. They become academically and socially resourceful, practices which prove helpful throughout their lives.

HOW DID IT ALL BEGIN?

Over fifteen years ago educators Mike and Diana Cohen led summer camping programs for teenagers. Though the trips were recreationally oriented, the campers learned to take care of themselves in the natural world and displayed vigorous curiosity about their surroundings. The Cohens, uncomfortable playing the roles of parents or authorities, found that given respect and guidance, campers could act like adults explore their own needs and govern themselves. A summer was not enough time for the campers to fully integrate their reborn curiosity and increased social awareness into their personalities. It was barely enough time to scratch the surface of years of conditioning. So a nine month school was born.

WHAT IS THIS EXPEDITION?

A school bus, a backpack and wide open eyes - these are the essential elements of the expedition. I discuss the expedition in first person

for though I'm many miles away from this year's group, I consider the expedition a permanent part of my life and something with which I'd like to involve myself in the future. As a group, we are as self-sufficient as possible. We cook for ourselves on Coleman stoves and construct homes (tents) every night in National Parks or on private land.

Most students receive college or high school credit for the expedition and some graduate students join the group to train as environmental educators. We draw questions from the social and natural environments around us, and find answers through talking to experts including farmers, scientists, historians, musicians and rangers, reading books and observation.

On the two expedition summer programs and the school year in which I participated, I became aware of my cultural conditioning and learned to question it. As a group we discussed and abandoned our conditioned needs for daily showers, television, coffee in the mornings, teachers to spoonfeed knowledge, wild Saturday nights, etc. Freed a great deal from our dependency on technology and old habits, we learned how to work together and alone in real-life situations.

The "reality" of the expedition experience distinguishes it from other therapies. We don't discuss conflicts for just fifty minutes a week with an objective party practicing a school of techniques, rather we receive reactions continuously from interested individuals unafraid to include their own biases and opinions - real people, with whom we live. Advocating what has come to be called "reality therapy", in the early 1900's Dubois recommended that "the physician treat his patient as though he were his friend."² The expedition takes this one step farther, so that in trying to heal themselves friends

help each other. Everyone has an emotional and financial investment in the success of the group and therefore the other individuals that compose it. I can't help being concerned that Rick is considering using drugs over vacation, I don't want to have to deal with his bad feelings when he returns.

OF PARENTS, PEERS, AND EXPEDITION PRINCIPLES

The primary criteria for acceptance to the school program are a full knowledge of the expedition, available through interviews and Mike Cohen's books, Our Classroom is Wild America and Across the Running Tide, and a strong desire to participate. In "Our Classroom" Mike Cohen sets up a sample interview between himself and an applicant, explaining the understandings which each student is asked to accept before starting the program.

Interviewer: You asked me why we don't allow smoking at Trailside*. It just doesn't seem right for an educational program which is trying to provide good learning experiences, to have part of that year spent learning or practicing harmful habits or actions.... It is really important, it would seem, that members of our school group be able to act sensibly and make sense to each other and outsiders as well, otherwise we would experience each other as unreachable or hypocritical, and that would be a breeding ground for mistrust.³

In addition to giving up cigarettes, students also agree not to use drugs and not to involve themselves in exclusive relationships which might hamper their participation in group experiences. Initially, these understandings are often accepted parentally (in the Transactional Analysis sense of the word) and viewed as rules. In my group one girl, let's call her Karen, hid a marijuana joint in her sock during her interview for the expedition. She started the program expecting to smoke cigarettes and pot and hid them from those whom she perceived as authorities - the guides and "straighter" students. One night on the second week of school in New Hampshire's White Mountains she

*Trailside is the name of an expedition previously run by the Cohens.

gathered with a few other students and brought out her cigarettes. Some students joined her and smoked, others declined.

Mike Cohen writes, "we can achieve valid education only if we can keep alive and healthy the expedition situations that provide it. The difficult problems of human relationships are of prime concern, for if such relationships are uncomfortable, poor morale could undermine all other aspects of the school."⁴ This principle became evident to us as we hiked the day after the cigarette incident. We sat down for a seminar on the Boreal Zone around us and people just didn't seem to have questions or observations. Mike asked why it was colder at the top of the mountain, but Karen and her group were silent, eager to talk among themselves on the hike down. It was probably evident to Mike and Diana Cohen and Frank and Beth Trocco, our guides, that "something was going on", but they chose to wait until a student was uncomfortable enough to broach the subject.

Don called a meeting that night. He had refused Karen's cigarettes and didn't want to have to conceal the incident from the group, didn't want to live in an atmosphere of mistrust and resented that his environmental science seminar was ruined by the clique of smokers. As a group we discussed our feelings and the many questions raised by the incident. Why did Karen want to smoke? Why did others join her? How were non-smokers affected? What are some alternatives to smoking? Why did Bill, who also knew about the incident, bring it to Diana Cohen's attention rather than bringing it up to the group? We began to realize how an individual's state of mind and actions were important to the group, how much we all affected our environment.

Over the years the school's directors have found that the students have an easier time articulating their thoughts if they

share a common psychological vocabulary. Mike Cohen presented our group with a seminar on personalities, drawing largely on concepts from transactional analysis. Born to Win and I'm O.K., You're O.K. were among the 150 books in our school library (two shelves in the back of the bus). We learned to recognize types of interactions within the group and in our pasts. Authorities in Karen's home life, perhaps her peers or advertisements, had given her "strokes" for smoking, made her feel sophisticated, grownup, fashionable. During the expedition Karen sought the roots of the "unOK feelings" which had made her listen to those authorities and found new ways of getting "good feelings" less toxic than smoking.

In addition to academic seminars, we held daily meetings discussing plans and problems. The problems ranged from why the Bus Committee had neglected to sweep the bus, to Rick's dismay upon receiving a hit of acid in the mail from a brother who refused to believe he'd stopped tripping, to Curt's anxiety about college acceptances to Julie, who missed her home in Alaska. We became finely tuned to our feelings, remembering our dreams and feeling free to discuss even non-concrete problems or vague feelings which made us uncomfortable.

We developed phrases and therapeutic techniques to fit our needs. I learned to take "reality checks", inquiring as to whether my perception of a situation corresponded to others' perceptions, discarding the notion that I could always interpret communications correctly. I learned to speak "in terms of myself", to say "I'm uncomfortable when you take pictures out the window" rather than "you shouldn't do that".

Every week we each wrote a paper - - poems, stories, letters

to congressmen, scientific, social, or most often personal essays. We read each others papers and commented individually on the style and content. Every week I received feedback from at least ten concerned individuals on both my English and my feelings. We developed our writing as a mode of self expression.

BEYOND SELF AND OUR HOME SOCIETY

In addition to much looking inward, on the expedition we examined our home cultures and other communities in the United States. We lived for two weeks on the farm of a Mennonite family in Lancaster, Pa. In exchange for our labor -- and twenty-four young bodies can collect quite a few eggs and pull many carrots in a short space of time -- the family talked with us about their lifestyle. This was a rare and precious opportunity, for the "Dumb Dutch" (as they humbly call themselves) rarely associate with the "English" (outsiders). Their horse-and-buggy lifestyle differed greatly from the ways we had grown up. We also lived for two weeks on a Hopi Indian reservation, attending sacred ceremonies from sun-up till dusk, trying to understand their religion, history and social predicament which were so foreign to us. We talked with Maine homesteaders who had rejected their New York City roots for a simpler country life and native Mainers who eagerly adopted all the technology of cityfolk. Through getting to know politicians, geologists, farmers, musicians, artisans, astronomers and many others, we came to realize how many options lay open to us. Sam, a track star whose father once told him that he'd never be smart so he might as well become an athlete grew to enjoy writing papers and presenting them to the group for criticism. On the expedition, I, who'd been taught to value intellectualism, learned the worth of silliness, emotions and music. Rick no longer felt

destined to become a partner in his father's carpentry business. He now toyed with the ideas of becoming a musicologist or anthropologist. We didn't entirely reject our previous roles, just learned that there were other ways to live. Our eyes opened to the wide world.

On an expedition which changes from day to day based on the students needs and ideas, the weather and coincidence, flexibility is valued highly and learned well. We rearranged our plans at the last minute while on the island of St. John because of two people we met while snorkeling, exploring tropical reefs. A twenty year old expert on bats, and a top union official both proved highly willing and able to help us learn about their fields. Learning to be flexible and to view the people around us as potential teachers were valuable lessons.

AND WHEN STUDENTS GO HOME?

We had three intercessions during our expedition year, going home for a week during Thanksgiving and three weeks in December and February. The intercessions gave us time to read and to apply what we'd learned to the world outside the expedition situation. Thanksgiving break was a difficult time for me. I missed an open sky above me and a friend in the next sleeping bag at night. I found myself attracted to different people from the friends I had previously. I hated to see how much fuel my family wasted. Far more independent than two months earlier, I didn't fit my former roles.

The group joked less than usual as we drove to Williamsburg, Virginia after Thanksgiving. We had a lot to discuss in terms of our experiences at home. Despite Charlie's increased self-confidence, when at home his brother terrified him. Kathy's boyfriend had begged her to stay home with him and she felt guilty for leaving. A few students had gotten high and were curious as to what forces at home

made them feel the need for drugs. Karen said, "We can talk about this all we want, but when I'm with my friends and they pull out a joint, there's no question that I'll smoke. Though there are other things I'd rather do, I don't want to lose face in their eyes. I lose a little self-respect every time I smoke, but I do it anyway." Karen decided it might be helpful to play out the situation. Adopting techniques from Drama Therapy⁵, a couple of students acted the roles of her druggy friends and Karen tried to resist. It was soon apparent why Karen felt she couldn't be accepted unless she was high. She created resentment by placing herself on a higher plateau from her stoned friends while preaching her new values at them. She acted out this situation several times, trying different approaches, until she found one with which she was comfortable.

Role plays were among the few instances in which we placed the frame "therapeutic" around our actions rather than discussing the situation with our genuine personalities. But since we didn't encounter drugs on the expedition, we felt they merited special techniques. Judging from our experiences over the next intercessions, this role play may have helped us handle situations at home.

In discussing his experiences during an intercession one student wrote:

I found that the lifestyle I had begun to live was so different from the way some of my friends were living that I couldn't enjoy being with them any longer. Most of them felt...that the only thing they could do to cope was get stoned, watch T.V. and cruise...When I first got home and tried to talk to some people I saw that if I wanted to I could relate to them in a meaningful way. Instead of excusing the way I was acting because of the way I grew up, I saw that I could direct my own life... For the first time in my life I could talk to my parents about what I was feeling without being embarrassed or afraid of what they might say.⁶

What happens to the students who've shared an expedition ex-

perience? Do they slip back into old habits or are they entirely new people? What lasting effects has the expedition had on their lives? Does the expedition therapy work for everyone? It must be remembered that each student and each expedition year is different. In the year following my expedition 15 students attended college, four returned to high school and one member of our group worked. I can see how the expedition has affected our lives; we're more aware of our natural environment than our peers, more able to actively pursue our interests and express our feelings. For the most part we "keep in touch", though there are a couple of individuals who've dropped completely out of sight from the rest of us. We can only guess what Sam is doing now. When he left the expedition he was eager to seek treatment for his dyslexia and was secure enough to jumprope without fearing for his masculinity. Perhaps he's returned to the drunken fights of his pre-expedition days, however, I think the kind, sensitive personality he often displayed was strengthened on the expedition.

Most of us would say our lives have been greatly improved because of the expedition. No longer an aimless Brooklyn pothead (which he really was at one time), Rick now does carpentry in his father's shop during the summer and, at the age of eighteen has won a federal grant to establish a musicology department at the college he attends. Not studying solely for grades or parental approval and not afraid of professors, most of us find it easier than our non-expedition peers to get what we want out of our education. "In terms of myself", the expedition was also invaluable socially and emotionally. I'm not afraid of closeness, frankness or different lifestyles. I'm not afraid to reject the values of my peers if they don't correspond with my own.

The expedition has opened us up to the option of further therapy. I went into analysis the year after my expedition experience and was able to establish open communication almost immediately. Other expedition graduates had become facilitators in Transactional Analysis groups and peer counselors.

Some students, while glad they participated in the expedition, feel it is lacking in areas. In order to avoid exclusive relationships, there was no sex between us, so sexual or romantic problems rarely arose in conversation. Some former students report readjustment problems in thinking of themselves again as sexual and romantic beings. The guides don't take on the role of encouraging discussion in this or other areas, feeling that if a person is ready and the problem important, he/she will bring it up. Or, as is often the case, an individual's problem will inhibit the group's functioning so he will be forced to confront it. Students leave the expedition not problem-free, but with the tools to deal with problems not yet resolved.

CAN IT BE PROVEN?

If psychologists look for figures and statistics to document the expedition's success, they won't find them. However, few therapies have statistical "proof" of their success.* Until the systematic study has been completed of the expedition, we'll have to rely on subjective reports from expedition students and parents. The Pollitts write about their daughter's expedition year, "We were both astonished and impressed at the end of that year to see the dramatic transformation of our young-girl student into an assured, poised, mature young woman, whose understanding of herself and her awareness of her environment exceeded our own."⁷

*Remember the old legend about the outcome of psychotherapy? (cont. pg. 13)

Sharon, terribly confused at the start of our expedition and practically unable to write a coherent sentence wrote the following in a letter to me this fall (she knew nothing of this paper):

I'm starting anew educationally. You know I had terrible emotional problems and those were with me all through my school days. These problems took over everything. I let myself receive trash courses in high school and graduated a year early to escape my dissatisfaction... I put myself further into the pits of self-defeat.

The fact that I graduated early with no upper level math or science and no established English skills set me back (remember my early papers?)...It is truly awful to be sick for so long and not to get the right help.

Anyway, I got myself turned around to restore my self image on the school (expedition). Last year I had to do more self-evaluation and free myself to stop cutting myself short...I'll have to start over with almost a year's worth of remedial build up before I can start to work on a degree....My life was once insanity. I wouldn't wish my early pains on anyone.

But it's over. SUNY Albany is great! There are so many things I've never had before. I was always distant, not letting anything penetrate me. It kind of hurt to see others develop happily.

I study all week and my activities include the most physically demanding clubs...I'm taking up the banjo.... A girl staying here had planned a party and a date for me....Oh, if only I had been able to rid my mind of ill patterns many years ago, I could have been another Einstein! (Tee hee). Love, love, Sharon

And finally, here are excerpts from letters I received this fall from a high school friend who's on the expedition this year, probably in Pennsylvania at this very moment.

Sept. 20th: We're in Lubec, Maine. It's beautiful, like all New England. Our meetings are long and frequent. I talk pretty much but it's hard to get used to the fact that I can tell people when they're bothering me....

Sept. 25th: We're in Bar Harbor now....The group is great.... We've had so many meetings where all we do is laugh. I haven't laughed so hard so often in months!....Best of all so far, we visited the Shaker community in Sabbathday Lake, Maine and we went to one of their Sunday meetings. It was so fantastic! They sang and we did too, and they talked and sang Simple Gifts with us and told us they

loved us and hugged us all and clasped our hands.
Oct. 2nd: I'm having a marvelous time. Our meetings
are getting much more personal. I'm talking more,
learning that I have feelings that are real and
mean something. I've been bringing up things that
bother me and I've been voicing my uncomfortable
feelings. They haven't been dumb, they're real.

*(cont from pg. 11): One third of treated patients get better,
one third stays the same, the remaining get worse.⁸

NOTES

1. Michael J. Cohen. Our Classroom is Wild America. Freeport, Maine. Cobblesmith, 1974. p.xii
- 2) Norman I. Bar. The Responsible World of Reality Therapy. Psychology Today, Feb. 1974
- 3) Cohen, op. cit. pp.76-77
- 4) Ibid, p.28
- 5) For further information about Drama Therapy see Lewis Yablonsky's Psychodrama. Basic Books, Inc. NY 1974
- 6) Cohen, op. cit. pp.160-161
- 7) Ibid. p. 1

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